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FOR THE FUTURE: AN EXAMINATION OF CONSPIRACY AND TERROR
IN THE WORKS OF DON DELILLO

by

ASHLEIGH WHELAN

Under the Direction of Dr. Christopher Kocela

ABSTRACT

This thesis is divided into two chapters, the first being an examination of conspiracy and paranoia in *Libra*, while the second focuses on the relationship between art and terror in *Mao II*, “In the Ruins of the Future,” *Falling Man*, and *Point Omega*. The study traces how DeLillo’s works have evolved over the years, focusing on the creation of counternarratives. Readers are given a glimpse of American culture and shown the power of narrative, ultimately shedding light on the future of our collective consciousness.

INDEX WORDS: Conspiracy, Paranoia, Identity, Terror, Art, Evolution, Consciousness

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ASHLEIGH WHELAN

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May 2011

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my father, Dr. Timothy Whelan,
an amazing person and an inspiration to my life and academic pursuits.

I love you Dad: Thanks for Everything.

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1 Introduction

Don DeLillo is heralded as one of the most important writers of our age. To date he has authored nineteen novels, four plays, a screenplay, and a myriad of essays and short stories. His first novel, *Americana*, was published in 1971, while his latest novel, *Point Omega*, was released in early 2010; with a career spanning over 40 years he has written about many of the major cultural events to occur in America over the last half century. Critics are quick to analyze DeLillo's cultural commentary on subjects that range between sports, asceticism, communism, conspiracy, and terrorism. With such a staggering oeuvre, many critics and academics have poured over his fiction in order to identify the themes that repeat and shift over time, and to study, through his characters, how our culture responds to the events that influence our contemporary identity. Critic Samuel Coale provides a well-versed account of DeLillo's work in his book, *Paradigms of Paranoia: The Culture of Conspiracy in Contemporary American Fiction*:

DeLillo foregrounds the spectacle of contemporary culture as embodied in the media, sports, terrorism, language, money, sex, and consumer capitalism. The background of his fiction hints at some kind of ultimate visionary mystery, buttressed by his characters' inchoate spiritual yearnings and longings, probably nourished by DeLillo's own Catholic past and schooling. The postmodern disconnection often occurs between foreground and background, between the presentation of the poststructuralist materiality of language and culture and the aura of metaphysical uncertainty that hovers within and behind or beyond it. (90)

I believe this account serves as an appropriate introduction to my own studies of DeLillo's work. In this thesis I will discuss elements of DeLillo's work that reinforce and expand upon Coale's observations about a postmodern disconnection complete with metaphysical uncertainty.

In this thesis, I will discuss two prominent themes, paranoia and terror, in order to explicate their importance not only within DeLillo's literary canon, but also to our current cultural attitudes. The first chapter will be a study of conspiracy in DeLillo's early career, specifically in the novel *Libra*, demonstrating how the work functions as cultural critique. *Libra* is a novel about the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and the effects this event had on our society and culture. As is widely historically noted, there is a prevalent belief that Lee Harvey Oswald was not the sole killer of JFK, but instead that there was a larger plot at work. In *Libra*, DeLillo introduces many possible conspiratorial plots that range from a massive governmental involvement, to the hatchings of plans by renegade anti-Castro CIA members, to the theory of the lone gunman, and even to the proposal of the murder as pure accident. DeLillo introduces a cast of characters, some real (like Oswald and David Ferrie), and some fictional (like Nicholas Branch and Win Everett). For many Americans, the assassination was seen in black and white, meaning that either Oswald was solely responsible, or it was a government conspiracy. In *Libra*, readers are not given the binary choice of "lone-gunman or patsy," but instead are forced to look at the "seven seconds that broke the back of the American century" (*Libra* 181). In *Libra*, we must view not only the "whodunit," but also the larger cultural implications of the event – particularly the spread of paranoia.

Scholar Patrick O'Donnell notes in his book, *Latent Destinies*, that one reason we may fall for conspiracy and embrace paranoia, is that:

we seize paranoia in a kind of Nietzschean embrace because, perhaps counterintuitively . . . we regard paranoia as the last epistemology, the final form of human knowledge before knowledge passes away into information. Paranoia is, at root, a way of knowing ourselves in relation to those others as having the capacity to be known, to be seen, to be objects of desire and attention. (9)

DeLillo uses the characters of Lee Oswald, and conspirator Win Everett's young daughter Suzanne, to present the disturbing paranoid state still present in our culture, a mind frame that it seems will only continue unless we recognize how profoundly it is defining our existence.

O'Donnell points out that "paranoia manifests itself as a mechanism that rearranges chaos into order, the contingent into the determined. As such, it is a means of (re)writing history" (11). This search for order and chaos is a desire present in conspiracy as well, and therefore it is important that it manifests as paranoia, a mind frame that O'Donnell tells us "can be viewed as the reaction-formation par excellence to the schizophrenias of post-modern identity, economy, and aesthetics" (11). DeLillo's treatment of paranoia, then, is important as it highlights the intricacies of living in a fragmented, de-centered, post-modern nation. In *Libra*, we find the emergence of conspiracy in a modern world after the assassination of JFK, and we are able to examine the effects paranoia has on our culture through the characters of Lee Harvey Oswald and Suzanne Everett. What readers receive is DeLillo's own account of history--one in which conspiracy and paranoia are major players in the psychology of our times. This "renarrativization," or (re) writing of history, serves as the segue into my second chapter, where I will continue my study of paranoia in DeLillo's novels, but this time with a focus on terror.

In chapter two, I will show that DeLillo continues to write his version of history, now in the form of a “counternarrative.” While in the first chapter I do not identify any solutions or remedies to the unsettling presence of paranoia, in the second chapter I will show that the writing of counternarratives partially alleviates the symptoms of paranoia in our society. My second chapter delves into DeLillo’s later career, starting with the publication of *Mao II*, and moving to discussion of “In the Ruins of the Future,” *Falling Man*, and finally *Point Omega*. Through close reading and character analysis, this chapter will demonstrate the continuance of paranoia as seen in the shift from conspiracy to terror in DeLillo’s later work. Unlike the early novels, these stories do not contain a dominant conspiratorial plotline, but instead focus on terror and the effects it has on our society. After the attack on the World Trade Center, citizens of the United States were faced with a terror and fear that was unprecedented in our current culture. In order to avert the attention from home soil, a War on Terror was begun in the Middle East. In the States, people tried to go back to the way things were before the attack--to forget about the pain and trauma and slip back into an illusion of safety. However, as DeLillo shows in his post 9/11 novels, we are forever changed by this event, as is illustrated in his focus on individual characters’ emotional recovery. This focus on the individual may gradually progress to a deeper understanding of our collective human identity, and this is exactly what DeLillo implies through the characters in his later novels. DeLillo’s later works, as the second chapter makes clear, highlight the importance of writing towards the future, of creating stories that can be used to combat the troubling auras that define us as Americans. The creation of counternarratives, as introduced in “In the Ruins of the Future” and continued in *Falling Man*, finally comes to fruition in *Point Omega* with the use of Teilhard de Chardin’s theory of the *Omega Point*. It is in this last section that I will focus on the movement in DeLillo’s work toward creating a

counternarrative, and I will show through close textual analysis that counternarratives may be the very thing we need to save our culture from paranoia and terrorism. It is through the beauty of art and the search for human connection, DeLillo suggests, that we will reach a higher level of consciousness.

2 *Listening to the Voices in Our Heads: Re-examining Libra and Conspiracy Theory*

Examining Conspiracy in *Libra*

Don DeLillo is no stranger to conspiracy theories. Readers can quickly identify the budding theories in *Great Jones Street* (1973), *Ratner's Star* (1976), *Players* (1977), and *Running Dog* (1978), all of which are seen as building blocks for DeLillo's ultimate "conspiracy novel," *Libra* (1988). There are many historical conspiracy theories that surround the assassination of John F. Kennedy; therefore, it comes as no surprise that DeLillo offers his own version of what happened that day in Dallas. Countless materials and publications exist covering the Kennedy assassination and its aftermath, and many try to come to conclusions about what really happened. DeLillo's account provides no answers; instead, as he states, *Libra* offers readers "a way of thinking about the assassination without being constrained by half-facts or overwhelmed by possibilities, by the tide of speculation that widens with the years" (*Libra* 457). In addition to providing new perspectives on the assassination, the book also offers a different way of thinking about conspiracy, and conspiracy theories, in postmodern society.

To better understand the importance of conspiracy in our culture, it is necessary to look at what other critics note about its importance. In his book, *Introducing Don DeLillo*, John McClure speculates, "conspiracy theory, on which the thriller is based, replaces religion as a means of mapping the world without disenchanting it, robbing it of its mystery. For conspiracy theory explains the world, as religion does, without elucidating it, by positing the existence of hidden forces which permeate and transcend the realm of ordinary life" (103). In other words, in a postmodern society that no longer relies on religion to make sense of chaos, we still desire a

way to bring order to the world. We want things to make sense, and if we can't find coherence in our material lives, we will invent theories as a substitute. Paradoxically, these conspiracies still allow us to hold on to a bit of mystery and intrigue by not offering a clear revelation of facts and evidence. Yet Samuel Coale, in his book, *Paradigms of Paranoia*, has a different view, saying:

Conspiracy theory supposes that events are ultimately rational. The final clue or missing piece will reveal the cabal behind the ongoing plots and networks. Yet religious mystery suggests the non-rational, the beyond-the-rational in terms of visions or ideas that can only come in the form of revelation, in dreams, in elusive mystical symbols and experiences. The two, conspiracy theory and religious mystery, remain virtually incompatible, so to suggest that one has 'replaced' the other only blurs the issue. (88)

While I agree that conspiracy theory does follow a logical progression and traceable course, I believe that Coale is shortsighted in his view of conspiracy, especially with regard to its cultural implications. When we combine McClure's and Coale's perspectives, however, an important set of world views emerge: for some, conspiracy exists to provide possible answers; for others, conspiracy exists as a starting point for proving whether a theory is indeed true or not. Many people feel that conspiracy is mysterious and irrational, and it is precisely this allure that makes it an attractive possibility for revealing meanings and providing answers. I believe McClure is right in his observation that conspiracy has become one way our society tries to order and define the world, a job that used to belong primarily to religion. Conspiracy allows people to feel as though there is a larger force at work. This is why, for many, conspiracy-driven plot lines have proven to be quite successful, for they provide readers with the mystery and intrigue, while at the

same time offering answers and meaning. Readers feel a sense of satisfaction knowing that things can be explained.

As noted earlier, however DeLillo offers something different in *Libra*. In his book, *Beyond Grief and Nothing*, Joseph Dewey writes:

[U]nder DeLillo's treatment, the assassination speaks to the depth of our need for such plotting, our hunger for plausibility. Dealey Plaza instructed DeLillo's generation that despite being empowered by centuries of Enlightenment assumptions about the sheer power of the speculative imagination to render solutions and despite an event that has engendered a dense florescence of interpretation and explication, we have been left no closer to surety. (93)

This absence of truth in an age of information and knowledge is a problem that DeLillo grapples with in many of his novels. In *Libra*, he uses the conspiracy of the Kennedy assassination to show that we, as a culture, yearn for plots and closure. If we don't believe what the government, or Warren Report, (or any other authority) has to say, then we start to think there may be some sort of conspiracy at work that explains the situation. DeLillo posits that this is a false dichotomy that provides illusions of security, and ultimately serves as an inadequate explanation of the event. Even with all of the documents and theories, we are no closer to knowing the truth about that day in Dallas because the cause of the problem lies deeper. DeLillo reinforces this in *Libra*, through the character of Nicholas Branch who says:

If we are on the outside, we assume a conspiracy is the perfect working of a scheme. Silent nameless men with unadorned hearts. A conspiracy is everything that ordinary life is not. It's the inside game, cold, sure, undistracted, forever closed off to us. We are the flawed ones, the innocents, trying to make some

rough sense of the daily jostle. Conspirators have logic and a daring beyond our reach. All conspiracies are the same taut story of men who find coherence in some criminal act. (440)

A close reading of the passage will indicate an undertone of sarcasm in the sentence structure and word choice. This, coupled with a close reading of the book and criticism up to this point, will indicate that this is not DeLillo's "thesis" about conspiracy because he does not demonstrate that these theories provide us with answers. Instead, he illustrates that such accounts actually offer multiple versions of the event, bringing us no closer to closure. In *Latent Destinies*, O'Donnell concurs, writing:

As the critical narrative enactments of the enchained circumstances of the assassination and its personages indicate, we seem to desire—even enjoy—the multiple theatricalizations and investitures of the event because they somehow both offer the promise or truth behind Kennedy's murder (whether the product of a conspiracy or an isolated incident) and yet withhold a total explanation that would close the books on the matter. (46)

O'Donnell points out that our culture likes mystery, possibility, and variety; however, we still constantly search for knowledge and answers. DeLillo wants to take readers away from answer-seeking narratives, and instead offer a story in which chance and possibility reign supreme.

DeLillo creates a character in *Libra* that acts as researcher and theorist of the assassination; Nicholas Branch is contracted by the FBI to compile a document even more substantial than the Warren Report that chronicles the murder and its effects. At the beginning of the novel, we learn that Branch believes it was just as much chance as conspiracy that led to Kennedy's death:

Nicholas Branch thinks he knows better. He has learned enough about the days and months preceding November 22, and enough about the twenty-second itself, to reach a determination that the conspiracy against the President was a rambling affair that succeeded in the short term due mainly to chance. Deft men and fools, ambivalence and fixed will and what the weather was like. (441)

Branch may be viewed as a possible double for DeLillo himself, and Branch's struggle to compile the "secret history" of the event is comparable to DeLillo's undertaking in the writing of the novel. Ultimately, both come to the conclusion that no amount of evidence, physical or otherwise, is going to change the way we view the Kennedy assassination. We will not be able to prove these theories true or false. O'Donnell writes, adding:

Whether one accepts, at one explanatory extreme, the 'lone gunman' theory of the assassination, or a mega-conspiracy at the other in which the Mafia, the CIA, the FBI, Lyndon Johnson, and/or pro-and Castro extremists intentionally or accidentally cooperated to derail the national destiny, all of the renarrativizations and re-viewings of the symptomatic event suggest that what is unacceptable to the interpellated general public is that there is no final sacramental relic of the 'real' to be gained by researching the photos and archives, no ultimate exegetical logic to an episode that threatens to undermine the orderly progress of history and destiny. (46)

What we learn from *Libra* is that, whether or not we believe Kennedy's death was conspiracy, or chance, or whatever else, has little effect, and all these theories do is serve as a substitute for the missing 'real'. Critic Skip Willman, in his article, "Transversing the Fantasies of the JFK Assassination," notes: "[w]hile conspiracy and contingency theories differ in their respective

visions of social reality, they serve the same ideological function: to explain the failure of society to constitute itself as a harmonious whole” (408). However, even though the public may strive for a harmonious whole, conspiracy theories are not neat packages controlled by men in expensive suits; they do not answer any questions, or bring order and sense to our world. DeLillo shows us this by introducing the element of chance into the conspiracy surrounding Kennedy. He asserts that there are things that will always be outside of our control. What is more important to note is the overall effect conspiracy has on our culture, meaning how it changes or shapes the way we view the world. As O’Donnell astutely points out, “In *Libra*’s intensive reflection on the collision between narrative plots and the contingencies of actuality, what replaces this lost sense of a coherent reality are the hermeneutic productions of cultural paranoia” (48). We are given no clear “answers” or “solutions” to the event that occurred that fateful day in Dallas, but, as stated before, we are left with the task of rethinking the role of conspiracy not only as it pertains to the assassination, but also as it affects American culture by creating an air of paranoia and fear in everyday life.

In order to understand the importance and significance of paranoia in our times, we turn once again to O’Donnell’s book, *Latent Destinies*, where he informs readers:

Usually employed as a term for individual and, increasingly, collective psychosis, paranoia commonly refers to the pathological condition of individuals who exhibit a host of familiar symptoms . . . When not limited to the symptoms of individual psychopathology, paranoia is often viewed either as a universal personal condition (one available to subjects across history, as much to Julius Caesar to Lee Harvey Oswald) or a mindset that, like a contagion, can temporarily afflict a nation or a people. (14)

O'Donnell provides a definition of paranoia, while DeLillo demonstrates through characterization individual accounts of paranoia, and the potential of such paranoia to grow and spread. DeLillo's focus on the character of Oswald may be the more telling indicator and ultimate critique of our society as his portrayal causes readers to rethink the importance of an individual in such an event, and how this participation spreads to the population at large; this is an observation that is not unique to my own reading, as is evidenced by the multiple analyses of DeLillo's Oswald found in academia today. Willman notes, "For DeLillo, Oswald represents a 'symptom' of American society . . . [and] embodies not only the social antagonisms such as class struggle, repressed in fantasy conceptions of the idyllic American way of life, but also the social contradictions inherent to consumer capitalism" (408). In *Libra*, readers are presented with an Oswald who does not fit the model of the psychotic lone gunman or the patsy controlled by the CIA; instead, he is portrayed as a paranoid, almost average citizen and consumer in American culture. For many of DeLillo's readers who are themselves American citizens, this may be an uncomfortable comparison, one many would rather not acknowledge.

When looking at Oswald as an example of a paranoid citizen, analysis shows that just as conspiracy ultimately lends itself to various outcomes and meanings, "Oswald . . . plans a future in which he will piece himself together as an interdisciplinary subject available to multiple interpretations" (O'Donnell 51). Therefore, he mirrors the conspiracy that gave him recognition: we will never know the "true" Oswald. In *Libra*, DeLillo reinforces this in the depiction of Oswald is in his jail cell, anxiously contemplating his future:

He could play it either way, depending on what they could prove or couldn't prove. He wasn't on the sixth floor at all. He was in the lunchroom eating lunch. The victim of a total frame. They'd been rigging the thing for years, watching

him, using him, creating a chain of evidence with the innocent facts of his life. Or he could say he was only partly guilty, set up to take the blame for the real conspirators. Okay, he fired some shots from the window. But he didn't kill anyone. He never meant to fire a fatal shot. It was never his intention to cause an actual fatality. He was only trying to make a political point. Other people were responsible for the actual killing. They superimposed his head on someone else's body. Forged his name on documents. Made him a dupe of history. (418)

Oswald is beginning to realize the paradoxical freedom he has achieved. It seems it is up to Oswald himself to write his own history. While we are unable to know whether or not he will be believed, we are also equally unaware of which role he will choose to adopt, as all agency is lost when Oswald is shot and killed, erasing any trace of control he had in creating his own version of the event. Regardless, we see that Oswald desired a connection, an involvement, a place and name in history—he wanted to be remembered the way he wanted. However, his death curtailed the possibility to write his own narrative, and instead the creation of his history was left to the public. Oswald is a symptom of the larger public who desire the creation of stories that pull us individually into the larger forces or constructs at work in the world. O'Donnell notes:

In the historical imagination that *Libra* explicates, the wound of the assassination is healed by the narratives that re-create it and that always just miss the reality of the event no matter how many variations of it they depict. Yet again, as DeLillo repeatedly makes clear, we are compelled to proliferate these near misses of history in order to continue in the mode of a misrecognition through which we constitute ourselves as 'in' history. (57)

We, as participants in American culture, are all involved in this process of writing ourselves into or onto history. As noted earlier, we want to take control of situations and devise plots that give us answers and meaning. Popular culture prefers to believe that Oswald was the lone gunman, and that there was no conspiracy involved. As Dewey notes, “*We* made that Lee Harvey Oswald—and DeLillo audaciously unmakes it, returns Lee Oswald to compelling uncertainties, gives depth to the accessible image that the media rendered as history, re-complicates *history* with *his story* . . . to remind us that definitive form and stable certainties are the dreary, distracting inevitabilities of the surface-culture of the media age” (94-95). The shifting realities in Oswald’s history mirror those in DeLillo’s treatment of conspiracy. These multiple narratives cause unease when presented in the form of conspiracy, as confusion about what to believe increases, and trust in others disappears. The same is true with Oswald and his fragmented identity; all the uncertainty causes him to become paranoid, and so he strives harder to create his own version of the events. Dewey is right to note that DeLillo does not adhere to ideologies that neatly “explain” the problems of the world, but he fails to mention the unease that DeLillo harbors concerning the presence of our paranoid, fragmented postmodern subjectivity.

Oswald is used to show that our lives are largely shaped by our current cultural tendencies, and as a result, the pervasive emotion in postmodern society becomes fear, which is turning us into a bunch of paranoid citizens. DeLillo posits that we are undeniably operating in a culture in which our need for coherence and order is so strong that we entertain the idea of conspiracy theories, while at the same time we participate in creating a narrative for our culture that is permeated with paranoia and fear. What we learn is that it is not important whether or not the conspiracies are true, or even whether they exist; instead, it is our desire and creation of such stories that should be a cause for concern. O’Donnell affirms this saying, “Such branch-work,

DeLillo suggests in *Libra*, will continue as long as reconstructing the assassination, its characters and contingencies, allows us to shuttle between utter indeterminacy and utter certainty in search of the history that will contain us as paranoid subjects of knowledge, called to order in the national story” (58). If we are unable to break away from this search for truth and certainty then we will be forever caught in a world of anxiety-driven and paranoia-filled uncertainty. In doing so we will, like Oswald, put ourselves into situations that risk a loss of agency in creating our own narratives. In the following section I present a close reading and textual analysis that will show an alternative version of the consequences of remaining stuck in such a society, as seen in DeLillo’s portrayal of Win Everett’s daughter, Suzanne.

Paranoid Culture as seen through the eyes of a Little Girl

In *Libra*, Win Everett is the conspirator who plans an attempt to “not” assassinate the President, creating an assassination designed to end with a shot that deliberately misses. Everett devises this plot because he is hoping to re-create the Bay of Pigs invasion, which went horribly wrong the first time around, subsequently losing him his job with the CIA. His plan involves using Lee Harvey Oswald as a communist supporter, who attempts to kill the President, thus spawning an anti-Castro movement, and an invasion of Cuba. His idea is to script and fabricate Oswald into the perfect scapegoat; yet much to his surprise later in the novel, Oswald already fits the bill.

Readers are first introduced to the Everett family near the beginning of the book, in a scene that depicts Win eating breakfast and “ thinking about secrets. Why do we need them and what do they mean?” (16). From the beginning we know that Win is a man with a lot to hide; why else would he be musing about secrets over his breakfast? A man with that much to hide

must certainly lead a double life, meaning he is one person on the job (or wherever his “secrets” take place) and another when he comes home. This type of existence awakens to the fact that eventually he will end up “at the mercy of [his] own detachment” (18). Although Win may lead a double life, he is still attached to his family. So much so, in fact, that he has to be aware of his wife’s whereabouts at all times. He is okay “[a]s long as he knew where she was. She had to be close and he had to know where she was. Those were the two inner rules” (222). It seems that Everett’s inner secrets may also reveal his insecurities. Perhaps in a world that is so layered and fragmented, this is one of the few ways he can find comfort. However, anxiety and secrets are not limited to the adults in the Everett family, as readers find these traits in Suzanne as well.

When readers are first introduced to his daughter, they find that “[s]he stood with her head propped against her daddy’s arm, feet crossed in a certain way, half sullen, a routine bid for attention” (18). While it may be normal for a young child to vie for her parent’s attention, it doesn’t seem appropriate for a six-year old to appear as “sullen,” especially when at the end of the paragraph we are left with Mary Frances, Everett’s wife, listening to “a commentary on the need for parents to be more vigilant in checking what their children read and watch and listen to” (18). These descriptions imply that Suzanne may be subjected to narratives that she has no business hearing. As the book progresses we find Everett “at work devising a general shape, a life. He would script a gunman out of ordinary dog-eared paper, the contents of a wallet . . . They wanted a name, a face, a bodily frame they might use to extend their fiction into the world” (50). Everett is referencing his intentions to use Oswald in his machinations to kill the president; he has no fears about his ability to fabricate the perfect scapegoat for his conspiracy, and this is probably due to his own practice of scripting multiple lives for himself. Meanwhile, we learn that Suzanne is still sullen. DeLillo writes, “Suzanne sat next to her mother, arms at her sides, slim

white legs pointed straight out, a show of mock obedience. They were not talking to each other” (135). The family’s detachment noted at the beginning of the novel continues as we find Mary Frances in the car thinking about her happiness, while “Suzanne [is] holding her breath” (136). This leaves the reader with the impression that, like so much else in the book, the family’s happiness is scripted as well.

Mary Frances is the first to comment on Suzanne’s unusual behavior and she relays her concerns to her husband: “She’s always going off with Missy Tyler,” she says, “They practically hide from me at times. I don’t know, it’s just, I think she’s so preoccupied lately, so *inner*, and I wonder if there’s something unhealthy there” (222). Here we find a connection between father and daughter that is deeper, and perhaps more disturbing, than we originally imagined. Instead of learning how to play catch, or make pancakes, Suzanne is already learning how to become an “inner” person, as she is picking up on the techniques of detachment, and is already harboring secrets, much like her father.

These themes are further developed in the last appearance of the child in the novel, at which point the reader is made aware of Suzanne’s inner secret. Suzanne pretends to be asleep, but as soon as she knows her parents are out, she begins her mission to move her “Little Figures.” There is danger involved because “[o]nce they found the Little Figures, that was the end of Suzanne. She would have no protection left in the world” (365). Soon the nature of the figures is revealed: “The Little Figures were not toys. She never played with them. The whole reason for the Figures was to hide them until the time when she might need them. She had to keep them near and safe in case the people who called themselves her mother and father were really somebody else” (366). Suzanne is already aware of the fabricated people and lives around her, most importantly her parents. Just as her father has to have his “figure” (his wife) around

him at all times to feel safe, or just as her mother has to reassure herself that her family is happy, Suzanne must rely on her clay dolls for comfort. She has clearly learned the techniques of detachment from her own family, and is already in the process of creating another family that satisfies her needs, just as Everett uses Oswald in the conspiracy. Like Oswald, she begins to exhibit signs of paranoia, participating in the renarrativization of her life. Win has no idea that his daughter has become involved in the world of secrets and paranoia. This is seen in his dismissal of his wife's concerns when he says, "She's all right. She's fine. She's a healthy child" (222). He obviously has not consciously, or intentionally, intended for Suzanne to pick up these habits, but it has become inevitable that Suzanne will pick up on, and absorb, this paranoia. DeLillo is clearly writing cultural critique.

DeLillo uses the character of Suzanne as a means of illustrating his point that conspiracy and paranoia are not limited only to the active players, but instead, the effects are also felt by those who are not in on the secrets. Suzanne's story encourages us to see that we are all in some way or other responsible for, and implicated in, the conspiracy theories that abound in our society, and as a result, we are all exposed to the resulting paranoia. DeLillo is trying to call attention to the ever-growing presence of paranoia and fear in our society; a presence that he finds disturbing. Of all the characters in *Libra*, I feel that the story of Suzanne is poignant in illustrating what O'Donnell refers to as "real history." As O'Donnell makes clear, "Through the arbitrations of narrative, the subject restructures the real as the historical; using the very materials, as it were, that cause paranoia, s/he converts the arbitrary and contingent into the determined fatalities of 'history' and the stories of the nation" (12). DeLillo shows, in his portrayal of the Everett family, the way we use our paranoia to create alternate "fatalities of history" that will be written into our collective narratives. The dangers of such stories are made

shockingly clear, as we are given a disturbing portrayal of typical family life. Although Suzanne, her father, and the rest of the characters in the novel are writing their misrepresentations of history, in his portrayal of this little girl, DeLillo paints an accurate, personal account of the effects of paranoia on our society.

Conclusion

I have shown through critical analysis and examination of existing scholarship the importance of conspiracy not only in *Libra*, but also its implications for the everyday lives of Americans. We live in a world where our desire for coherence and order is so strong that we create narratives of conspiracy in order to provide answers and meaning. As DeLillo and O'Donnell illustrate, the effects of these narratives, or versions of history, are found in the presence of paranoia in our society. As demonstrated by Oswald and Suzanne, when we script our own realities and identities, we eventually become detached and estranged from the actual world around us, and in turn we become increasingly paranoid. It seems, however, that there is another possibility emerging from the creation of stories and alternate versions of history: One demonstrated by DeLillo's own composition of *Libra*. By delivering his own version of the Kennedy assassination and effects DeLillo gives an account of this historical event that may in fact be more compellingly real than any other before, precisely because it does not seek to provide answers or impart a final truth. I believe DeLillo illustrates in his creation of the novel, the power of narrative to provide us with an almost healthy alternative to the narratives of fear and paranoia that abound in our world. As DeLillo writes in *Mao II*, "stories have no point if they don't absorb our terror" (116), and so he continues to write fiction that provides his readers

with a place where one can view and examine the ills of our culture, while at the same time enabling us to reflect and learn from the implications they have on our lives.

In the next chapter, I will continue my study of DeLillo's "renarrativizations" which, in his later writing, evolve into the creation of "counternarratives." In an examination of *Mao II*, I will examine the emergence of terror in DeLillo's writing, a theme that takes the place of conspiracy, and illustrates a concern for the power of narrative in the face of terrorism. After the attack on the World Trade Center, DeLillo wrote an essay for Harper's magazine entitled, "In the Ruins of the Future," and it is in this essay that DeLillo calls for the creation of counternarratives to combat the narratives of terror and fear. A few years later he publishes *Falling Man*, a novel that provides a harrowing emotional account of the effects of terrorism, while at the same time foreshadowing the redemptive and healing powers of trauma, as is seen in his characters' desire for connection. It is in *Point Omega* that readers find the culmination, to date, of DeLillo's efforts at counternarrativization, giving an intimate glimpse of the power of narrative to evolve human consciousness.

2 *Finding Hope in the Power of Narrative: A Study of Art and Terror in Mao II, “In the Ruins of the Future,” Falling Man, and Point Omega*

Beginnings: *Mao II* and “In the Ruins of the Future”

DeLillo is famous for creating characters that represent and attest to the politics of our times. When *Mao II* was published in 1991, it was quickly deemed a “terrorist novel” for its portrayal of communist China and Maoist terrorist cells in Eastern Europe. DeLillo’s novel centers on the main character, Bill Gray-- a reclusive writer who agrees to be photographed by journalist Brita, much to the disapproval of his caretaker Scott, who tries to protect Gray from overexposure and selling out. After being photographed, Gray is somewhat freed from his isolation, travels to London, meets terrorist coordinator Hammad, and eventually gets caught up in a Maoist cellblock in Beirut. The novel is an exploration of the relationship between art and terrorism, and the power that both hold over creation of popular paradigms. Critics have identified DeLillo’s own musings through one of his character’s reflections:

There’s a curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists. In the West we become famous effigies as our books lose the power to shape and influence . . . Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated.

(41)

Critics agree that DeLillo is using Gray to voice his own concerns about the state of literature in the face of terrorism—a state in which writers have lost their power, which now belongs to the

terrorists. What we need to note here, however, is that DeLillo is still in the act of producing literature; he is still writing in the face of terrorism with the assumed hope that he will be able to influence our cultural development.

As noted in chapter one, DeLillo's earlier novel, *Libra*, focuses on the idea that we are operating in a culture in which our need for coherence and order is so strong that we have developed a paranoia that allows us to entertain the idea of conspiracy theories, in an attempt at finding a rationale or order to our chaotic, fragmented world. Over time, the focus on conspiracy in DeLillo's shifts toward terrorism as the predominant cultural concern. In his article, "God save us from bourgeois adventure," Steffen Hantke affirms that there has been a turn from conspiracy to terror, not just in DeLillo's novels, but in politics as well: "Accordingly, the main target of conspiracy theory has shifted clearly toward matters of internal over external security; a change that has brought the figure of the terrorist back to the center of both political attention and collective imagination" (221). The progression from conspiracy to terror is a natural one, given the relationship established between the two. Hantke continues,

Conspiracy theory, together with its steady recurrence as a theme in contemporary American fiction, has reflected changes within a global politics that the U.S. has undergone since the end of the Cold War. By adapting and rearranging its discursive strategies to suit the new political realities arising from these momentous changes, conspiracy theory has demonstrated its enduring usefulness in a climate of shifting ideological alliances . . . Yet even as the conspiratorial threat is transferred from the outside to the inside, the creation, consolidation, and reaffirmation of an identity (national, ethnic, historical, ect.) remain the focus of conspiracy theory. (221)

Hantke points out that identity is central to conspiracy theory, and as DeLillo shows us, it also plays an important role in terrorist fiction, as seen in *Mao II* when Brita goes to visit Abu Rashid (leader of the Maoist sect) in Beirut. There he explains to her, “ We teach them identity, sense of purpose. They are all children of Abu Rashid. All men one man . . . [we] teach that our children belong to something strong and self-reliant. They are not an invention of Europe. They are not making a race to go to God. We don’t train them for paradise. No martyrs here. The image of Rashid is their identity” (233). Here the figure of the terrorist emerges in the image of Abu Rashid, as the children are taught to identify not necessarily with the man himself, but with the image of him, an image that ultimately represents freedom through terrorism. They want to create their own identity, and write their own history, one that is separate from the dominating Western presence. Rashid and Brita discuss a hostage situation, saying:

as long as there is a Western presence it is a threat to self-respect, to identity . . .
terror is what we use to give our people their place in the world. What used to be
achieved through work, we gain through terror. Terror makes the new future
possible. All men one man. Men live in history as never before . . . we make and
change history minute by minute. History is not the book or the human memory.
(235)

The conversation highlights the desire to create an independent individual account of history. It is here that DeLillo begins his speculations about the future of terrorism. As he delves into the world of global identity and political oppression, we are reminded of his earlier observation that art (and literature) no longer possesses the power to shape our culture; instead it is the terrorists who hold the cards. Through Abu Rashid, DeLillo provides readers with a glimpse into the inner mind of a terrorist who believes that:

[i]t is possible to make history by changing the basic nature of a people . . . Mao regarded armed struggle as the final and greatest action of human consciousness. It is the final drama and the final test . . . You die for the people and the nation, your death is massive and intense. Die for the oppressors, die working for the exploiters and manipulators, die selfish and vain. (236)

This power to change history is used in the attacks against others, and also in the willingness to die for a belief--a sacrifice that DeLillo suggests is connected with a more developed form of human consciousness. Through Abu Rashid, readers see a glimpse of how a terrorist may think; by changing the basic nature of humanity, people can change the course of the world. Here it seems that DeLillo is echoing his earlier fears about the dangers and potential of narrative as registered in the effects it can have on society. *Mao II* marks DeLillo's first attempt at exploring terrorism in this way, and while it may seem that he is positing a bleak proposal about our future, wherein artists have lost control and terrorists are the ones who will produce true change, DeLillo's subsequent work shows the emergence of hope and belief in the power of narrative.

DeLillo's next work that probes the themes of terror and culture is his seminal essay, "In the Ruins of the Future," written shortly after the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center. The message that DeLillo advances in this work sheds a much more positive light on the power of narrative in the face of unspeakable evil. As foregrounded in *Mao II*, the attacks were, according to DeLillo, aimed specifically at America. He explains:

It was the high gloss of our modernity. It was the thrust of our technology. It was our perceived godlessness. It was the blunt force of our foreign policy. It was the power of American culture to penetrate every wall, home, life, and mind . . .
Terror's response is a narrative that has been developing over years, only now

becoming inescapable. It is our lives and minds that are occupied now. (“In the Ruins”¹)

When he wrote the conversation between Brita and Abu Rashid a decade earlier, warning of a shift in power, it was almost as if DeLillo predicted the future. However, at that point DeLillo showed little hope for the use of narrative to combat the ills of society; in contrast, he now writes: “[t]he narrative ends in the rubble and it is left to us to create the counternarrative” (2). While in *Mao II* and *Libra* there was little hope of reclamation of control for art over terror, in this famous essay readers find a call to arms: We must take back our agency and begin to weave the stories that will create our future.

Creating the counternarrative in *Falling Man*

DeLillo’s next attempt at creating what he calls a “counternarrative” is the composition and publication of *Falling Man*, a novel published in 2006 about the attacks on the World Trade Center. Many Americans believe the Middle-Eastern terrorist group Al Qaeda was responsible for the terrorist attacks; however, there are many others that believe the United States government was at least partially responsible for the terrible events of that day. A simple internet search will yield countless websites dedicated to uncovering the “truth” about 9/11, and in addition there are a myriad of documentaries and print publications put out by concerned citizens, that attempt show “what really happened” in terms of the American governments involvement in these affairs. For this reason, many readers were expecting at least a mention of conspiracy in *Falling Man*, given DeLillo’s past novels; however, he does not deliver a plot line rich with conspiracy or mystery, but instead chooses to focus on his characters’ inner, emotional responses to the events. This approach reinforces the idea explored in *Libra*, in which it is not

answers or coherence that matter, but rather the effects that traumatic events have on our society. If a narrative is to have redemptive powers, it cannot seek to deliver answers, but instead must provide an alternate account of the characters and lives involved.

DeLillo divides *Falling Man* into three parts, the first entitled “Bill Lawton,” the second “Ernst Hechinger,” and the third “David Janiak.” As the reader discovers early on all three names are characters (either real or imaginary) in the novel. The plot that connects them follows the lives of Keith and Lianne Neudecker, a couple who both survive the attacks on the WTC, only to be re-confronted by their troubled marriage. Although the two re-unite after the attacks, neither seem to really re-connect due to the fact that both undertake an inward journey. Keith begins an affair and becomes obsessed with poker, while Lianne focuses on caring for Alzheimer’s patients and develops a new interest in religion. As Linda Kauffman notes in her article, “The Wake of Terror: Don DeLillo’s ‘In the Ruins of the Future,’ ‘Baader-Meinhof’, and *Falling Man*, ”: “DeLillo highlighted ‘the counter-narrative,’ which is both subversive and heart-breaking...the counter-narrative’s provenance is the realm of the unspeakable, the unfathomable. It does the work of mourning” (354). In other words, DeLillo is attempting to provide readers with an account of the event that will absorb their trauma and terror. It is not surprising then, that he delivers a novel that is centered on the individual identities and inner lives of the characters.

Kauffman’s article does an excellent job of analyzing the inward turn present in *Falling Man*, and the effects this shift has on the characters. She notes, “In *Falling Man* after the terrorist attacks, life takes on a dimension of unreality—disoriented in time and space. The characters feel puny, insignificant” (371). As DeLillo illustrates in the essay, “In the Ruins of the Future,” our stories and lives are changed after the attacks, and reality is not what it used to be. Kauffman elaborates, writing: “We are all, DeLillo suggests, the walking wounded, living with organic

shrapnel; the very skin of those driven by desperation and violence is seared into our own” (372). The identities of the terrorists and the victims of the terror are now enmeshed--a connection DeLillo probes deeper with his portrayal of the suicide bombers.

In *Falling Man*, the effect of terror on its victims is best seen in the misinformation that surrounds the character Bill Lawton. Keith and Lianne’s children are the first to mention the man’s name, but they try to keep it a secret from their parents. After much prodding and speculation, Keith is finally able to get some information out of his son, as he tells his wife, “The kid slipped. He let the name slip. He told me the planes were a secret . . . He was hearing Bill Lawton. They were saying bin Laden” (73). This is the first instance of how information and identity become obfuscated. Keith continues the conversation with his wife saying, “That’s the myth . . . Bill Lawton has a long beard. He wears a long robe, he said. He flies jet planes and speaks thirteen languages but not English except to his wives. What else? He has the power to poison what we eat but only certain foods. They’re working on the list ” (74). While there is some humor found in this passage about Bill Lawton, DeLillo also pointedly emphasizes the frightening and harmful effects of misinformation. This section of the novel also offers a connection with DeLillo’s account of young Suzanne Everett in *Libra*. As demonstrated in the first chapter, Suzanne exhibits a severe detachment and paranoia in the scene with her secret dolls. While Suzanne creates her own story and potential life, the children in *Falling Man* also create their own story and life for Bin Laden. In *Falling Man*, DeLillo targets the ambiguous accounts proposed by the media, and although the passage is an admittedly overly exaggerated account, DeLillo makes his point about the potential harm of narratives produced through misinformation. Most importantly, DeLillo reminds us that these narratives negatively affect our

future generations. By writing his own portrayal of the suicide bombers, DeLillo offers another narrative, one that is a bit more humanizing.

The character of Hammad is introduced as a young man who, while training to be a Jihadist, still harbors the desires and yearnings of an average person. DeLillo writes of Hammad's stay in Germany that he "looked at videos of jihad in other countries and [he] told them about the boy soldiers running in the mud, the mine jumpers, wearing keys to paradise around their necks." Later, readers learn that, "[l]ate one night [Hammad] had to step over the prone form of a brother in prayer as he made his way to the toilet to jerk off" (80). In juxtaposing these two descriptions, DeLillo shows readers a conflicted identity--a glimpse of a fragmented individual who is struggling between becoming a terrorist and remaining a normal young man. Hammad is faced with choosing which version of his narrative he will write. As the novel progresses, Hammad begins to shy away from thinking about girls, sports, and television, and begins to undergo a transformation. Kauffman notes, "Hammad, moreover, is acutely aware of his transformation while it is taking place. As he reluctantly surrenders his individuality, he imagines his life gaining mystery, status, structure. He acquires a meaning and purpose larger than himself" (356). In giving up his identity, Hammad feels that he is becoming a better person, an idea that DeLillo introduced in his essay, "In the Ruins of the Future." He writes, "The terrorist shares a secret and a self. At a certain point he and his brothers may begin to feel less motivated by politics and personal hatred than by brotherhood itself. They share the codes and protocols of their mission here and something deeper, a vision of judgment and devastation" (1). What DeLillo presents here is the idea that a desire for human connection and identification allows one to evolve to a higher level of consciousness. Readers are given a humanizing account of the motives behind acts of terror. In contrast to the almost comically evil portrayal of Bin

Laden noted earlier, DeLillo provides with an alternate view of terrorism; one with the potential to provide a deeper understanding and connection. It is possible to look at terrorism in a different light when viewed under this lens. The beginnings of this exploration are found when looking back to *Mao II*, and are further developed in the essay, “In the Ruins of the Future, and the novel *Falling Man*.

It is important to note that DeLillo not only creates an “eastern” terrorist in *Falling Man*, but also introduces a “western” version, Martin Ridnour, also known as Ernst Hechinger. This man is Nina’s lover and he also an art dealer with a cloudy past, who holds strong opinions on politics. Hechinger “thinks these people, these jihadists, he thinks they have something in common with the radicals of the sixties and seventies . . . They have their theorists. They have their visions of world brotherhood” (147). There is a connection between terrorists and brotherhood that is reminiscent of the earlier quote by Kauffman. It would seem that DeLillo, through Hammad and Hechinger, is supporting and sympathizing with the terrorists; especially considering that Hechinger’s character is written as one who was involved in terrorist activities himself, and who has possibly even been a member of a German sleeper cell. Lianne “respected his secret, yielded to his mystery. Whatever it was he’d done, it was not outside the lines of response. She could imagine his life, then and now, detect the slurred pulse of an earlier consciousness. Maybe he was a terrorist but he was one of ours, which meant godless, Western, white” (193). DeLillo establishes a contrast between the two men to show the difficulty that exists when trying to define a terrorist, and as a result, readers are reminded of the importance of finding connection and bridging the gap between “us and them.” While Hechinger’s motives may be different from those of his eastern counterparts, it seems that as a terrorist, he also experiences not only a transformation of identity, but also a change in consciousness. By living a

double life, he is forced to view things from a different perspective, thus expanding his view of life in a way that allows for possibility and change. DeLillo also uses Hechinger to reiterate an earlier point from “In the Ruins of the Future,” the idea that “those in the Middle East want their own land, identity, and culture” (Kauffman 362), and that is precisely what men are willing to die for, with the hopes that future generations will obtain what they were denied. Many people have died for this in the past, and many will die for it in the future. This pursuit of “life, land, and liberty” is something that, as democratic Westerners, we should all understand (if not support). I am not proposing that DeLillo supports this democratic ideal, or for that matter terrorism, but I am arguing that he presents us with another way of viewing the supposed terrorists, in a manner that is more familiar to us as Americans. In fact it may be that he is critiquing the democratic logic, but he nonetheless uses the characters to show us alternatives. DeLillo shows through his creation of these two characters that we can create a counternarrative through the power of art and produce a change in our culture of terror; but, in order to do so, we must be willing to connect with humanity in a way that may not have been possible before the pain and loss experienced prior to September 11th. In addition to Hechinger and Hammad, DeLillo also uses the character of David Janiak to provide another perspective on the figure of the terrorist.

There is a famous picture taken on the day of the World Trade Center attacks that captures a man in free fall from one of the towers. Presumably the conditions in the building were so bad that this man chose to leap to his death rather than stay inside; the picture is said to encapsulate the reality and horror of the day. DeLillo takes the image of the falling man, and uses it, not only as the title of his novel, but also as a segue into his exploration of the power of art over terror. In *Falling Man*, David Janiak is a character who performs a reenactment of the

falling man photo at various points around New York City in the weeks and months following the attacks. His performances are baffling and inspire a debate over whether he is a “Heartless Exhibitionist or Brave New Chronicler of the Age of Terror” (220). Lianne witnesses one of his performances, and when she later reads his obituary she is reminded of the experience: “she could believe she knew these people, and all the others she’d seen and heard that afternoon, but not the man who’d stood above her, detailed and looming. She went to sleep finally on her husband’s side of the bed” (224). She sleeps on Keith’s side of the bed because she desires a connection—an understanding, or an answer—something she has been searching for ever since the fall of the towers. She tries to understand the falling man’s motives, to connect with his art, but she is left confused.

DeLillo portrays Lianne’s feelings toward Janiak in much the same way that he portrays Americans’ view of terrorists: fear, and the desire for answers and meaning, create in her a distance that makes it impossible to analyze and process any possible human connection. Obviously this is a somewhat unfair comparison since Janiak is using art, not violence, to instill terror, but it is terrorism nonetheless. In his performances, he jumps randomly and seemingly without meaning, indiscriminately forcing passers by to relive the terror of that day. And like other terrorists, he too is willing to die for his cause, as Lianne reads in his obituary that his final performance was planned to take place without a safety harness. DeLillo does not offer any motives or analysis of why the Falling Man chooses to re-create the horrors of that day, but I assume that by reliving this terror, Janiak hopes to connect with the survivors and spectators involved. Jumping over and over again in public will join him with many others as they are forced to watch his freefall and are reminded of the emotions of that day. Repeatedly, Janiak becomes one of thousands who lost loved ones or underwent trauma, as he is joined with the

collective spirit of all who in any way experienced the September 11th attacks. Possibly he is trying to force the spectators to rethink the events of that day—to take the time to analyze and connect with the trauma and pain. At the same time, he may also be trying to show them, through his performance art, that even in the face of such unspeakable trauma, there is the possibility of healing and beauty through connection. As DeLillo states in his essay following the attacks, “Before politics, before history and religion, there is the primal terror. People falling from the towers hand in hand. This is part of the counternarrative, hands and spirits joining, human beauty in the crush of meshed steel” (6). It is this collective experience, this counternarrative, that DeLillo finds so beautiful and inspiring—a glimpse at humanity that it seems we would all benefit to experience. In *Falling Man*, the characters desire to connect with one another and bond over the atrocities they experience; this is evidenced in DeLillo’s portrayal of Hammad, Hechinger, Lianne, and Janiak. DeLillo presents us with an emerging thesis about the relationship between art and terror, and more specifically how that relationship has the power to shape our culture and expand our consciousness. In the following section I will further explore this burgeoning relationship in DeLillo’s latest novel, *Point Omega*. I will show, through critical analysis, the power of art, specifically the creation of counternarratives, to overcome the presence of paranoia and terror in our society.

Turning Inward: A study of *Point Omega*

Don DeLillo’s most recent novel, *Point Omega* (2010), tells the story of Richard Elster, a retired academic contracted by the government for a secret intelligence mission in the Iraq war, who retreats to the remote California desert to enjoy his old age. Elster invites Jim Finley, an amateur filmmaker who wants to produce a documentary on Elster’s government time, out to his

house in the desert. The novel consists largely of conversations between these two men, but also contains an alternative plot line that focuses on an art exhibit in the Museum of Modern Art, and a man who is obsessed with the installation. Jessica, Elster's daughter, becomes involved with the art lover, then goes to visit her father in the desert, and subsequently vanishes without a trace. The novel does not follow a conventional plot line, and the ending offers no resolution to the mysterious disappearance. This is characteristic of DeLillo's novels after *Libra*, as it aligns with his thesis that it is not the truth or answers to the conspiracy that are important, but rather the effects they have on our culture that ultimately matter; as in *Falling Man*, DeLillo turns his attention to the inward life of the characters in the novel.

DeLillo's attention to the inner life of his characters becomes apparent in Dennis's thoughts on the MOMA exhibit, in Jessies's whimsical comments, and in the many conversations between Elster and Finley in the desert. It is in these conversations that DeLillo introduces Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's (1881-1955) theory of the Omega Point. While Elster and Finley debate time and the nature of existence, Elster remembers a theorist he studied in his college years, and from that scene on, Chardin's theory becomes a key focus of the characters' dialogue through out the rest of the novel. Chardin, primarily known as a French geologist and philosopher, was also a Jesuit Priest, and developed his religious world-view over the course of his life, but his work was not published until after his death. Chardin developed a theory of an Omega Point, the "place" where all human consciousness converges, and where humans reach an evolution towards the future; humanity must be ready to unite with a higher being or attain the "highest" level of consciousness. Through an analysis of the characters in the novel, accompanied by an analysis of an article by Adam Thurschwell on the relationship between art and terror, I will determine whether the novel demonstrates the failure of humankind to evolve to

a supreme level of consciousness. *Point Omega* opens at the MOMA in New York City, where an exhibition is showing an art installation featuring the 1960 movie, “Psycho” starring Anthony Perkins and Janet Leigh. This is not an ordinary movie screening, however, as the film speed has been slowed down so the movie will play for 24 hours straight. Right at the beginning of the novel, DeLillo introduces the idea that as humans, we need to slow down our lives and quit racing towards the future because when we go so fast, we are unable to appreciate the present. This is precisely what occurs at the film screening when an observer and avid fan, who we later learn is possibly named Dennis, is able to appreciate the film in a way never before imagined: “The less there was to see, the harder he looked, the more he saw. This was the point. To see what’s here, finally to look and to know you’re looking, to feel time passing, to be alive to what is happening in the smallest registers of motion” (6). This quote illustrates the connection between the slowing of time, the appreciation of life, and more specifically art. The man comes to the exhibit everyday and stands and watches for hours upon hours, while he analyzes the film, the time sequences, and ultimately himself. He knows that he differs from the other visitors who come in and only watch for a few minutes and then leave. The longer he stays at the museum, the more these feelings intensify. He feels that it “takes work, pious effort, to see what you are looking at. He was mesmerized by this, the depths that were possible in the slowing of motion, the things to see, the depths of things so easy to miss in the shallow habit of seeing” (13), a habit that he identifies as belonging to others, to those who desire “a common experience to be relived on TV screens, at home, with dishes in the sink” (12). The common person desires collective experience, while this man enjoys the solitude of individual interpretation, a desire that he believes is “above” the norm. This is an interesting departure from the thesis we saw developing out of “In the Ruins of the Future” and *Falling Man*, in which DeLillo celebrated the power of

collective experience. The man at the museum enjoys solitude and feels he is superior to the rest of humanity because in his isolation he is able to appreciate and experience life in a way others cannot. This is important because it indicates a distinction between the desires for connection with others that DeLillo will establish further through the main character, Richard Elster.

Elster also thinks about truth, life, and time while sitting on the front porch of his house in the desert. It is appropriate then, that DeLillo places him in the desert, for as Baudrillard points out, “[t]he unfolding of the desert is infinitely close to the timelessness of film” (*America* 1). Elster has nothing but space and the absence of time in which to ruminate, an activity he enjoys since “true life is not reducible to words spoken or written, not by anyone, ever. The true life takes place when we’re alone, thinking, feeling, lost in memory, dreamingly self-aware, the submicroscopic moments” (17). This reaffirms that, for DeLillo’s characters, true life is something that is only experienced in solitude, and is not a shared human experience. Perhaps this is why Elster decides to retire to the desert, far removed from the rest of humanity.

Elster prefers the desert because “There’s none of the usual terror . . . time is enormous . . . Time that precedes us and survives us” (44). In the city, Elster says, time continually surrounds us and dictates our every move, “There’s an endless counting down, he said. When you strip away all the surfaces, when you see into it, what’s left is terror. This is the thing that literature was meant to cure. The epic poem, the bedtime story”(45). Here is a return to the counternarrative; to the power of art to create an alternate, healthier reality. Critics are correct to point out that DeLillo often creates a character in his novels that best represents his own beliefs and attitudes; in *Libra* it was Nicholas Branch, in *Mao II* it was Bill Gray, in *Falling Man* it was Ernst Hechinger, and in *Point Omega*, it is Richard Elster.

Just as DeLillo creates versions of reality through his writing, by offering alternative accounts and stories, Elster is assigned to a job where he is charged with creating the reality of war. When assigned to a secret mission in the Iraq war, Elster learns that “war is abstract. They think they’re sending an army into a place on a map . . . There were times when no map existed to match the reality we were trying to create . . . Human perception is a saga of created reality. But we were devising entities beyond the agreed-upon limits of recognition or interpretation . . . We tried to create new realities overnight” (29). I believe what DeLillo means by “reality” is a story, or narrative of an event that gives an alternate version of what is believed to exist: a renarrativization. A connection emerges between the man at the museum and Elster in that both crave solitude and the slowing of time, and both realize that reality is something that we create. This brings a return to the theme of writing the counternarrative, of creating the new reality one in which time erodes and terror is no longer an invading presence in our lives. The problem with this is that we still desire a war, even if we condemn violence and terror. We desire the conflict of war because it creates purpose and meaning, and it provides us with a “real”, albeit harmful, narrative. Elster admits, “I still want a war. A great power has to act. We were struck hard. We need to retake the future . . . We can’t let others shape our world, our minds” (30). Hence, we need to wage war through the creation of alternate realities; we need to create a counternarrative. However, it seems that Elster may not be so confident about humanity’s ability to do this:

[m]atter wants to lose its self-consciousness. We’re the mind and heart that matter has become. Time to close it all down . . . I was a student. I ate lunch and studied. I studied the work of Teilhard de Chardin . . . He said that human thought is alive, it circulates. And the sphere of collective human thought, this is approaching the final term, the last flare. (51)

Through the character of Richard Elster, DeLillo entertains the notion that the human race is indeed approaching a radical reversion back to a state of simpler existence. In a rare interview published in the *Wall Street Journal*, DeLillo divulges that he studied Chardin during his college years, and then re-visited the work when he was composing the novel, at which point he became fascinated with “the idea that human consciousness is reaching a point of exhaustion, and that what comes next may be either a paroxysm or something enormously sublime” (Alter 2). Either humanity will suffer an uncontrollable sudden attack, or will undergo a transformation that pushes consciousness to a higher level. Through the character of Elster, and his repeated references to Chardin, readers see a glimpse of the transformations humanity may be approaching.

Chardin writes that we are approaching a point in human existence when something is going to change; people are going to start examining things in different ways:

we must recognize the rapidly increasing probability that we are approaching a *critical point of maturity*, at which man, now completely reflecting upon himself not only individually but collectively, will have reached, along the complexity axis (and this with the full force of spiritual impact), the extreme limit of the world. And it is then, if we wish to attribute a significant direction to our experience and see where it leads, that it seems we are obliged to envisage in that direction, finally to round off the phenomenon, the ultimate emergence of thought on earth into what I have called Omega Point. (*Towards the Future* 185)

There is a connection here between DeLillo’s earlier theories of the human collective, wherein we crave a desire to connect with other. It seems only natural then that Elster moves out to the desert, in an extreme environment, contemplating life: As Chardin notes, humans are “by nature,

directed towards an ending and a completion that are *internal in origin*” (185). When looked at under this lens, DeLillo’s characters, such as Hammad, Lianne, Keith, Janiak, Elster, Jessica, Dennis, and Finley are all at the beginning of this “inward turn” that characterizes the Omega Point.

These characters have all experienced an extreme trauma or pain; in *Falling Man* it was the attacks on the WTC, and in *Point Omega* it is the disappearance of Elster’s daughter. These extreme experiences can be alienating and can act as a cause for internal retreat; however, what all of these characters have in common is a desire for human connection. Readers see this desire in the museum visitor (Dennis) who has been watching the film and waiting for someone, specifically “a woman to arrive, a woman alone, someone he might talk to . . . sparingly of course, or later, somewhere, trading ideas and impressions” (14). Although there is a resistance to relationships, the man craves human connection and companionship. Likewise, Elster invites Finley out to the desert, not because he has any intention of participating in his documentary, but instead because he craves companionship. This desire emerges again when Elster’s daughter comes to visit, and Finley notices that “[h]e wanted her near him all of the time” (39). It is hinted that Dennis may be responsible for Jessie’s disappearance, and therefore his desire for connection may fall under the “paroxysm” portion of Chardin’s theory, implying an uncontrollable, sudden attack. On the other hand, Elster is just hoping for a closer relationship with his daughter, a desire one could look at as more sublime than Dennis’s cravings for companionship. Another way of looking at Elster’s desire for connection is to characterize it as the need for love. Chardin explains,

they are to group themselves ‘centrically’, *love* one another—with love that includes all individuals simultaneously and all as one whole. Yet there is no true

love in an atmosphere, however warm it may be, of the collective; for the collective is impersonal. If love is to be born and to become firmly established it must find *an* individualized heart, *an* individualized face. (187)

Even though these characters crave human companionship, they align with Chardin's theory and simultaneously avoid the human collective. They do not want to belong to a group or crowd, but instead they want connection on an individualized level. In *Point Omega*, the characters are vocal about their distrust for crowds.

At the beginning of the novel, the man in the museum is quick to recognize the coldness and meaningless nature of group mentality. Elster too recognizes this as he says, "We're a crowd, a swarm. We think in groups, travel in armies. Armies carry the gene for self-destruction . . . The blur of technology, this is where the oracles plot their wars. Because now comes the introversion. Father Teilhard knew this, the omega point" (52-3). Although Elster despises crowds, he "totally physically hates to be alone" (41). He does indeed feel that "[o]ther people are conflict" that is except for the "ones he chooses to be with him" (41), such as Finley and Jessie. Therefore, it is significant that Elster himself, at the end of the novel, becomes Chardin's individualized face that bears the pain of love. With the mysterious disappearance of his daughter, Elster becomes depressed. He no longer contemplates his mortality, the horrors of war, or the erasure of time in the desert. Finley is left to take care of the grieving man, and takes over the role of theorist, he says:

I thought of his remarks about matter and being, those long nights on the deck, half smashed, he and I, transcendence, paroxysm, the end of consciousness. It seemed so much dead echo now. Point Omega. A million years away. The omega point has narrowed, here and now, to the point of a knife as it enters a body. All

the man's grand themes funneled down to local grief, one body, out there somewhere, or not. (98)

All of their earlier contemplation becomes meaningless in the face of such a profound loss, and an answer surfaces to the shift from collective experience to individual contemplation. By reversing the name of the theory, DeLillo has recognized something that Chardin himself was unable to see--that the final evolution of human consciousness can only occur on an individualized level, through the pain of love. Elster becomes, as Chardin says, the *individualized* face of love, the *individualized* broken heart. Elster's transformation is in itself an evolution not to the Omega Point, but instead, as DeLillo switches it, to the Point Omega. He experiences a paroxysm so unsettling that it leaves him in a different state of consciousness,. But it is exactly the loss of meaning that holds the most significance. DeLillo shows us that while we cannot find love for the entire world, we may be able to produce change on an individual level. In other words, humans may not have the capacity to collectively evolve consciousness, but through the pain of loss and love, we can begin to make changes individually. This is connected to the task of creating counternarratives, a responsibility that DeLillo takes on personally as in his fiction, he begins to chart his own progression towards a higher consciousness and a greater good.

Writing for the Future

I have identified the distinction between the individual and collective, and have shown, through character analysis, the limits of Chardin's theory. The collective aspect starts in *Falling Man*, with the desire to connect through trauma, but turns sharply inward in *Point Omega* with the characters desire for connection on an individualized and controlled level. The character of

Richard Elster illustrates the individualized aspect of DeLillo's point omega, but does not show any evidence of DeLillo supporting a collective conscious evolution. However, as Elster says in the novel,

The mind transcends all direction inward. The omega point . . . Whatever the extended meaning of this term, if it has a meaning, if it's not a case of language that's struggling toward some idea outside our experience . . . What idea. Paroxysm. Either a sublime transformation of mind and soul or some worldly convulsion. We want it to happen" (72).

Humanity as a whole seems to be approaching a point where everyone is reaching the limits of consciousness, of the ability to live in a world full of paranoia and terror. We can either let war or terrorism wipe us out in a worldly upheaval (with the perpetuation of harmful narratives), or we can create our own form of positive terrorism through art that will help guide us towards a sublime transformation. An article entitled "Writing and Terror: Don DeLillo on the Task of Literature After 9/11," written by Adam Thurschwell, shows that literature too, is an act of terrorism. Thurschwell uses the theories of Maurice Blanchot to help explain the relationship between writing and terror; he says, "Blanchot demonstrates that what is at stake in the question of literature is, as much as literature itself, the relations among language, action—including political action—and world" (283). This situates literature in a macro perspective, and contextualizes the power that literature holds over our lives. While Thurschwell dedicates several pages to deciphering Blanchot's philosophy, I will use his analysis to briefly explain the theory of 'literature as terror.' In short, it all comes down to the concept of "labor," as Thurschwell explains,

for Blanchot the labor of the writer, at least in its intention, is ultimately indistinguishable from the labor of the terrorist—the radical re-making of an entire world, the total negation of the old in favor of something entirely new . . . the negative labor of the terrorist, which inevitably resorts to the absolute negativity of death, the negative labor of the writer also has death as its essence. (284)

DeLillo then, in the writing of his novels is acting as terrorist and remaking the world; he is doing exactly what he proposed in “In the Ruins of the Future”—writing the counternarrative. Therefore, one can view this as the beginning of a transition to the Omega Point. Evolving consciousness may entail a subjective sublimation in and of itself, but what DeLillo provides is a tool for such a transformation to occur on a collective level. If the process must take place as a form of love, as identified earlier, then a look at Thurschwell’s theory shows that “ literature must *also* be understood as this surplus within aesthetic representation, this act of love that preserves nothing and endows no significance or meaning whatsoever beyond love itself, but that at the same time is the source of ‘life’ in the *nature morte vivante*, the artwork as embodiment of genuinely lived experience” (“Writing and Terror” 292). If this is the case, then what Elster is experiencing is the genuine life, accompanied by transcendence to a higher plane of consciousness. And in a sense, readers and writers of literature too are undergoing the “lived experience”, a process that would not have been possible without our current state of global and national terror. As Thurschwell points out, “Art and aesthetic representation, DeLillo suggests, begins in mourning and identification with the (absent or dead) . . . such is the origin of the paradoxical ‘living still life’ assigned the task of slowing down the future in the name of the present of lived experience” (291). The “living still life” is a theme that was introduced in

Falling Man through Lianne who admires two paintings owned by her mother. As she looks at the works she realizes “there was something in the brushstrokes that held a mystery she could not name, or in the irregular edges of vases and jars, some reconnoiter inward, human and obscure, away from the very light of the paintings. *Natura Morta*” (12). Inspired by the WTC attacks, and the already burgeoning idea that art and terror are intricately linked, DeLillo creates characters and plot lines that don’t race toward the future, but instead “live in the present.” This theme focuses on that inward turn that ultimately produces an examination of connections with individuality, identity, consciousness, and the entire human collective. In *Point Omega*, through the character of Elster, he continues and expands this exploration of the relationship between art and terror, individuality and shared humanity.

Point Omega is the culmination to date of DeLillo’s studies into these subjects, but he began forming these theories as early as *Mao II*. While there seemed to be some doubt about the power of writing in the novel, by the publication of “In the Ruins of the Future” ten years later, DeLillo’s sprouting hope for the saving powers of art becomes clear. Thurschwell notes this as well and explains further how art and terror can indeed produce positive efficacy: “art, for DeLillo, is political just insofar as it contests late capitalism by attempting to represent—perhaps we should say, memorialize—the continuing vitality of present lived experience: the continuing chance for a ‘living still life,’ . . . a *nature morte vivante* . . . with all of the paradox that that expression suggests” (289). These forms of art separate us from the world of global capital and the speed of technology that blur and distort our visions of reality. Blanchot tells us that, “literature’s ‘ideal moment’ is ‘that moment when life endures death and maintains itself in it’ in order to gain from death the possibility of speaking and the truth of speech” (Thurschwell 284). This is precisely what DeLillo demonstrates in *Falling Man* and *Point Omega*. By writing a

novel about the survival and coping mechanisms associated with the September 11th terrorist attacks, DeLillo and his characters are able to endure death and terror, and yet still come out and speak the truth about that day. In *Point Omega* readers do not learn whether or not Elster recovers from the loss of his daughter, and therefore do not know whether he was able to reclaim his life in order to tell Jessie's story, but Finley does acknowledge that "The story was here, not in Iraq or in Washington, and we were leaving it behind and taking it with us, both" (99). Thus, leaving open the possibility of Elster creating his own counternarrative, of telling a different story. Regardless, we know with certainty that DeLillo has written an alternate version of the present, and at the very least offered some suggestions of the future. In the interview with the *Wall Street Journal* referenced earlier, DeLillo comments on *Point Omega* saying, "I wanted to suggest things rather than explore them fully" (Alter 4). What he suggests is a future where human consciousness will experience a sudden, uncontrollable attack, or will be erased entirely; in the face of global terror, both of these outcomes are plausible. DeLillo, through the creation of counter-narratives, produces his own form of terrorism—one that may prove to have an enlightening and positive effect on our future.

4 Conclusion

Through this study of DeLillo's writing from 1988 to 2010, a variety of themes have surfaced. In my first chapter, I argued that in *Libra*, DeLillo examines the effects of conspiracy on our culture, suggesting that our need for coherence and order is so strong that we have developed a paranoia wherein we turn to conspiracy for meaning and answers. We learn is that it is not important whether or not the conspiracies are true or false; instead, it is our dependence on paranoia itself as a model of knowledge that should be a cause for concern. The characters of Lee Harvey Oswald and Suzanne illustrate the effects that this paranoid culture has on us as individuals, such as compromised identity and detachment from reality. The consequences provide a bleak glimpse of what to expect if conditions do not change. As stated earlier, DeLillo offers no clear suggestions in this early novel for what we can do to change or improve our cultural crisis; however, through the use of Patrick O'Donnell's book, *Latent Destinies*, I was able to show that as early as *Libra*, DeLillo began to examine theories of (re)writing history. In his treatment of the Kennedy assassination, DeLillo demonstrated for readers the futility of constantly searching for meaning and logic in a world that is so fragmented and disconnected. By providing the public with an open-ended account of the assassination, DeLillo delivered a story that did not try to make sense of things, but instead embraced the multifarious nature of the event. In doing so, he created a renarrativization that directly counteracted the drive for compartmentalizing and ordering history. Present in that novel is an outline of the direction his work will take for the next twenty years, during which time he shifts his focus towards character-driven novels that examine the individual responses to traumatic events like the Kennedy

assassination. DeLillo specifically examines the power of art, and narrative, to overcome and connect humanity in the wake of tragedy and terror.

In my second chapter, I analyzed *Mao II*, highlighting the shift from conspiracy to terror that American society experienced at the end of the Cold War. Conspiracy and paranoia remain, but DeLillo gives primary attention to his characters' emotions and theories, rather than focusing on a conspiracy driven plot line. *Mao II* serves as an introduction to the relationship between art and terror, a theme that is repeated in all of the subsequent works. In this novel, DeLillo paints a bleak picture of the power of narrative to overcome the power of terrorism; he states that writers and artists have lost their agency, and therefore the creation of the future is left to terrorists. He writes in *Mao II*, that "news of disaster is the only narrative people need. The darker the news, the grander the narrative" (117), implying that there is no need for fiction in a world that contains so many diabolical narratives. After the death of main character and prolific writer, Bill Gray, readers are given an even bleaker portrayal of the power of art over terror. While DeLillo may have seemed less than hopeful in this novel, he progresses towards an enlightened and progressive standpoint in his works published after the attacks on the World Trade Center.

The September 11th terrorist attacks had an enormous impact on our nation, the world, and DeLillo himself. In "In the Ruins of the Future" and *Falling Man*, there is a continuation of the themes presented in *Mao II*. Most critics did not praise DeLillo's account of the WTC attacks, even though they clearly demonstrate an advancement of themes found in earlier celebrated works. "In the Ruins of the Future" acts as a beautiful lament for the countless losses of that day, and also serves as a call to arms for a change in the way we view our agency in situations so dire. DeLillo charges readers with the task of "creating counternarratives" that will combat the fear and paranoia present in the state of terror that encompasses our nation. He

instructs that we must create a future where we stop discrimination and hate, and instead focus on connection; he shows that traumatic events can be used as a basis for a deeper understanding of the power of acceptance. In *Falling Man*, readers see his thesis spelled out through the stories of Hammad, Ernst Hechinger, and David Janiak. DeLillo demonstrates that while these characters all play different roles in the attacks, they all desire connection and the opportunity to create their own narratives. In the characters of Hammad and Hechinger, readers are given two different views of terrorists and terrorism, and the motives behind such acts. DeLillo designs the two in a way that forces readers to re-examine presupposed notions and definitions of terrorism, namely the propagation of harmful and biased narratives. Likewise, in the portrayal of performance artist David Janiak, readers are given another view of terror, one that focuses on the relationship between terrorism and art. DeLillo ultimately gives a humanizing account of the “bad guys” thereby offering a counternarrative to the other fear-driven versions that abounded in the media at the time. He focuses on the emergence of a desire for a collective experience, one that comes out of traumatic and painful events. He demonstrates that through art, we may be able to accept and use our trauma for healing, and as a basis for connection with others. One way to do this is through the creation of counternarratives that focus on presenting positive, albeit painful, accounts of individual experiences.

Finally, in *Point Omega*, readers are able to see the importance that art, and more specifically literature, holds for our existence. In order to combat the troubling mental state present in our culture, we must undertake the task of creating counternarratives that will act as tools for creating a better world. It is through the power of art that we find hope for promoting an evolution of consciousness and mind. In this novel, DeLillo focuses on the work of theologian Teilhard de Chardin, who proposed the theory of the Omega Point. This theory states that

humans will reach a point in existence where consciousness will undergo a massive restructuring, either in the form of a paroxysm or a sublime evolution. In *Point Omega*, DeLillo suggests that we may have reached the time for the Omega Point, and we can look at the other works examined in this thesis as evidence for arriving at this crossroads. Through the character of Richard Elster, we are shown that if humanity is to undergo a sublime transformation, it must first occur individually, if it is ever to occur collectively. One way to ensure that we will not undergo a paroxysm, or complete desecration, is through the creation of counternarratives. Once we begin to think and produce these alternate realities, we can begin, through the power of art, to identify more cohesively as a whole. One way of looking at this is by viewing literature as a form of terrorism. We live in a world where nuclear wipeout is a legitimate possibility, and as a result, we are surrounded by paranoia and fear. If we are to combat these negative narratives, we must fight back with our own form of terrorism: literature. By creating counternarratives that produce alternatives to the aforementioned realities, we may be able to combat our depressing global state, and work towards Chardin's proposed sublime evolution.

Many tend to read DeLillo's novels as a form of fatalistic existentialism, an example being Samuel Coale who states,

This may help define DeLillo's strategy as a contemporary writer: he focuses on the dark details of contemporary life and then imitates at darker, ultimately unknowable forces beyond or behind those details, never spelling them out but leaving the reader and his characters with that vague sense of distrust and paranoia that hovers within the 'essential' outlook of the postmodern experience of conspiracy that grasps for some kind of certainty but simultaneously recognizes a witheringly almost obsessive skepticism. (*Paradigms of Paranoia* 91)

While I agree that DeLillo does highlight the “darker elements” present in our postmodern experience, I do not think he does so with an air of almost “obsessive skepticism.” Instead, I contend that DeLillo actually believes in the power of his craft and its ability to point out a more positive direction for humanity. Through a careful examination of DeLillo’s novels, we are finally able to understand his belief in the power and light of literature

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